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Christian commitment and personal wellbeing: Exploring the connection between religious

affect and global happiness among young churchgoers in Australia

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**Abstract**

*Drawing on data from the 2011 Australian National Church Life Survey, this study was designed to assess the connection between religious affect (as a measure of Christian commitment) and global happiness (as a measure of personal wellbeing) among a sample of 6,194 young churchgoers in Australia between the ages of 8 and 14 years, attending a range of denominations, including Catholic, Anglican, Uniting, Pentecostal and other Protestant churches. Employing the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity and the Powell Index of Global Happiness, the data demonstrate a significant positive correlation between religious affect and global happiness, after controlling for individual differences in sex and age.*

*Keywords: tweenagers, positive psychology, psychology of religion, churchgoing, happiness*

**Introduction**

The connection between religion and happiness generates a direct conversation between the psychology of religion and positive psychology (see for example, Atherton, Graham, & Steedman, 2011). The challenge to engage in this conversation is clearly raised by the claims made within mainline religious traditions. For example, the Judeo-Christian scriptures signal a hypothesised connection between religion and happiness in a number of places. Psalm 1 proclaims 'Happy are those who reject the advice of evil men... Instead they find joy in obeying the Law of the Lord.' According to Psalm 128, 'Happy is everyone who fears the Lord and walks in his ways.' Similarly, the Book of Proverbs proclaims, 'Happy are those who trust in the Lord' (Proverbs 8:32) and 'Happy are those who keep my ways' (Proverbs 16:20).

Assessing the empirical evidence available to test such claims advanced by the Judeo-Christian scriptures, Robbins and Francis (1996) identified studies that had found a positive association between religion and happiness, studies that had found a negative association between religion and happiness, and studies that had demonstrated no association. Commenting on such discrepancies within the empirical literature, Robbins and Francis (1996) concluded that the problem, at least in part may arise from the diversity of definitions and measures of both religion and happiness employed in this literature. Their recommendation was to initiate a series of studies that could be linked by some common measures employed over diverse samples.

Drawing on literature shaped within the psychology of religion, Robbins and Francis (1996) proposed that such a programme of research could be integrated by focusing on the affective dimension of religion, rather than indicators of religious affiliation, religious belief or religious practice. The argument is that the affective dimension gets closer to the heart of religion within individuals' lives. Following this recommendation, a series of studies have

now employed the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity (Francis & Stubbs, 1987) or the Katz-Francis Scale of Attitude toward Judaism (Francis & Katz, 2007) to explore the association between affective religiosity and happiness.

Drawing on literature shaped within positive psychology, Robbins and Francis (1996) also proposed that such a programme of research could be integrated by focusing on a model of personal happiness proposed by Argyle and Crossland (1987) and Argyle, Martin and Crossland (1989) and operationalised in their instrument, the Oxford Happiness Inventory. The argument is that this model of happiness benefits from robust conceptualisation, sound operationalisation, and a growing body of empirical literature. Following this recommendation, a series of studies has now employed the Oxford Happiness Inventory (Argyle, Martin, & Crossland, 1989).

This series of studies (employing the attitudinal dimension of religion alongside the Oxford Happiness Inventory) has drawn on a diverse range of samples, including 360 undergraduate students in Wales (Robbins & Francis, 1996); 212 undergraduate students in the USA (Francis & Lester, 1997); 295 individuals ranging from late teens to late seventies recruited from course participants (Francis & Robbins, 2000); 994 secondary school students between 15 and 16 years of age (Francis, Jones, & Wilcox, 2000), 496 participants over the age of 50 years engaged in an informal educational network for senior citizens (Francis, Jones, & Wilcox, 2000); 89 students in Wales (Francis, Robbins, & White, 2003); 298 female undergraduate students in Israel (Francis & Katz, 2002); 203 male undergraduate students in Israel (Francis, Katz, Yablon, & Robbins, 2004); and 284 female undergraduate students in Israel (Francis, Yablon, & Robbins, 2014). The fact that all of these studies found a positive correlation between religious affect and happiness provides strong scientific support for the connection between religion and happiness as assessed by the Francis measure of religious affect and by the Oxford Happiness Inventory.

In parallel to the set of studies employing the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity alongside the Oxford Happiness Inventory, a second set of studies initiated by Lewis, Lanigan, Joseph, and de Fockert (1997) employed the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity alongside the Depression-Happiness Scale proposed by Joseph and Lewis (1998). In this initial study Lewis, Lanigan, Joseph, and de Fockert (1997) employed two samples: 154 undergraduate students in Northern Ireland and 67 undergraduate students in England. In a second study, French and Joseph (1999) employed a sample of 101 undergraduates in the UK. In a third study, Lewis, Maltby, and Burkinshaw (2000) employed two samples: 64 Anglican priests in England and 70 Anglican churchgoers in England. Considered separately all five samples reported no significant association between scores recorded on the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity and the Depression-Happiness Scale. Reviewing the literature alongside the studies using the Oxford Happiness Inventory, Lewis and Cruise (2006) highlight the consistent difference found when happiness is assessed by different measures while keeping the measure of religiosity constant.**Research question** Against this background, the present study plans to build on this research tradition and to extend it in three ways. First, previous research has explored the association between religious affect and happiness across a wide age range, with the youngest participants aged 15 and the oldest participants in their eighties. The present study will extend the age range to a sample of 8- to 14-year-olds. Second, previous research has explored the association between religious affect and happiness within samples that include a wide range of religious engagement. The present study will restrict the range of religious engagement by drawing the sample entirely from among young people who are contacted within church congregations. Third, previous research has explored the association between religious affect and one specific measure of happiness, the Oxford Happiness Inventory. Since the Oxford Happiness Inventory was not designed for use among young people under the age of 14 years, the

present study employed a different measure of happiness appropriate for the age range 8- to 14-years, but with the underlying notion of happiness consistent with the form operationalised by the Oxford Happiness Inventory.

This new project assesses religious affect by the short form of the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity in order to link the new study with the research tradition that has assessed religious affect by means of this family of instruments. Indeed, the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity was originally designed for use among young people between the ages of 8 and 16 years (Francis, 1978). The reliability and validity of the 24-item version of the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity among this age range has been supported by a series of studies conducted in a variety of cultural contexts, including England (Francis , 1987), Scotland (Gibson, 1989), Northern Ireland (Francis & Greer, 1990; Greer & Francis, 1991), Kenya (Fulljames & Francis, 1987), and Nigeria (Francis & McCarron, 1989). Also the reliability and validity of the short 7-item version has been supported among young people between the ages of 8 and 16 years by a series of studies conducted in a variety of cultural contexts, including England (Francis, 1992; Robbins, Francis, & Williams, 2003), Northern Ireland and Scotland (Francis, Greer, & Gibson, 1991), and South Africa (Lewis, Francis, & Kerr, 2003; Francis, Kerr, & Lewis, 2005).

This new project assesses happiness by the development of a new short measure of global happiness accessing four domains of happiness well within the experience and vocabulary of 8- to 14-year-old students: self, family, school, and locality.

## Method

**Procedure**

The Australian National Church Life Survey is now a well-established instrument for assessing congregational opinions and attitudes across a wide range of Christian denominations. Surveys have been conducted in 1991, 1996, 2001, 2006 and 2011, and the

findings have been widely disseminated (Kaldor, Bellamy, Correy, & Powell, 1992; Kaldor, Bellamy, Moore, Powell, Castle, & Correy, 1995; Kaldor, Bellamy, Powell, Castle, & Hughes, 1999; Kaldor, Bellamy, Powell, Hughes, & Castle, 1997; Kaldor, Dixon, Powell, Bellamy, Hughes, Moore, & Dalziel, 1999; Bellamy, Cussen, Sterland, Castle, Powell, & Kaldor, 2006; Kaldor & McLean, 2009). The 2011 National Church Life Survey included a special questionnaire styled 'Children's survey for 8 to 14 year olds'. Participating congregations were invited to distribute these questionnaires among young people within the target age group attending either 'church groups for children and youth' or 'church worship services or mass'. Young participants were assured of privacy, confidentiality and anonymity. They were instructed *not* to write their name on the questionnaire.

**Participants**

The present analyses were conducted on data provided by the young people who attended church worship services or mass. Of the 6,194 participants, 3,258 were attending Catholic churches, 826 Anglican churches, 772 Baptist or Churches of Christ churches, 599 Uniting Church churches, 189 Lutheran churches, 168 Pentecostal churches, and 316 other Protestant churches, with the remaining 66 attending unspecified congregations. In terms of sex, 2,929 participants were male, 3,231 were female, and 34 did not disclose their sex. In terms of age, 799 were 8 years old, 902 were 9 years old, 982 were 10 years old, 1,014 were 11 years old, 975 were 12 years old, 784 were 13 years old, 665 were 14 years old, and 73 did not disclose their age. In terms of church attendance, 51% attended service every week, 32% most weeks, and 17% some weeks.

**Instrument**

In addition to sex and age, the following data from the questionnaire are employed in the analyses.

*Attitude toward Christianity* was assessed by a modified version of the short form of the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity (FSAC) as documented by Francis, Greer, and Gibson (1991) and Francis, Lewis, Philipchalk, Lester, and Brown (1995). This instrument invited participants to respond on a five-point scale (agree strongly, agree, not certain, disagree, disagree strongly) to seven items: I know that Jesus helps me; I think going to church is a waste of my time; God helps me to lead a better life; God means a lot to me; prayer helps me a lot; I know that Jesus is very close to me; I think the Bible is helpful to my life (modified from the original form: I think the Bible is out of date).

*Global happiness* was assessed by a short four-item index developed for this study and named the Powell Index of Global Happiness (PIGH). This instrument invited participants to respond on a five-point scale (agree strongly, agree, not certain, disagree, disagree strongly) to the following items: I am happy with my school; I am happy with myself; I am happy with my family; I am happy where I live.

**Data analysis**

The data were analysed by the SPSS package, using the frequency, reliability, correlation and regression routines.

## Results

The first step in data analysis explored the psychometric properties of the two core instruments, the measure of attitude toward Christianity and the measure of global happiness. Table one presents the properties of the short-form Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity in terms of the correlations between each individual item and the sum of the other six items, the item endorsement in terms of the sum of the agree and agree strongly responses, and the alpha coefficient (Cronbach, 1951). These data demonstrate a high level of internal consistency reliability ($\alpha = .90$), with each item correlating well with the sum of the

other items (*r* ranging from .47 to .78), and a high level of positive affect (endorsement of positive items ranging from 78% to 91%).

- insert tables 1 and 2 about here -

Table two presents the properties of the Powell Index of Global Happiness in terms of the correlations between each individual item and the sum of the other three items, the item endorsement in terms of the agree and agree strongly responses, and the alpha coefficient (Cronbach, 1951). These data demonstrate that each of the four items contributes in an equal way to the overall identity of the underlying construct (*r* ranging from .37 to .44), while the relatively low alpha coefficient ($\alpha = .62$) suggests the notion of 'global happiness' is a broad construct. The item endorsement demonstrates a high level of happiness (endorsement ranging from 85% to 95%).

- insert table 3 about here -

The second step in data analysis explored the bivariate correlations between the two principle variables (sex and age). Two main conclusions are suggested by this correlation matrix. First, the data confirm the wisdom of regarding sex and age as potential contaminants of the relation between religious affect and global happiness. Compared with male students, female students record higher levels of religious affect and higher levels of global happiness. Compared with younger students, older students record lower levels of religious affect and lower levels of global happiness. Second, the data confirm a significant positive correlation between religious affect and global happiness.

- insert table 4 about here -

The third step in data analysis employed multiple regression to take sex differences and age differences into account before examining the effect of religious affect on scores of global happiness. In this regression model global happiness served as the dependent variable and the independent variables were entered in the fixed order of sex, age, and religious affect.

These data confirm a positive correlation between religious affect and global happiness after controlling for individual differences in sex and age. The beta weights also suggest that age and sex contribute additional predictive power to levels of global happiness alongside religious affect. The highest levels of global happiness are found among the younger female churchgoing students who hold a highly positive attitude toward Christianity.

## Conclusion

This study set out to extend scientific knowledge concerning the connection between religion and happiness by operating within a developing research tradition specifically concerned with religious affect or the attitudinal dimension of religion. The aim was to explore this connection among a younger population than had been included in earlier studies (8- to 14-year-olds) and among a population in which religious engagement was salient (churchgoers). The difficulty encountered by this research objective was the need to develop a measure of happiness appropriate for the age range under investigation. While the Oxford Happiness Inventory had provided a consistent measure of happiness across the earlier set of studies reported by this research tradition, this measure was not deemed appropriate for these younger participants. The question must remain open regarding the extent to which the notions of happiness accessed by the Oxford Happiness Inventory and by the Powell Index of Global Happiness may be regarded as comparable. Notwithstanding this reservation, the data generated by the present study (conducted among 6,128 young Australian churchgoers) is consistent with the findings from the other nine studies listed in the introduction to this paper (conducted in both Jewish and Christian contexts) that have all reported a positive correlation between happiness and religious affect. Two main conclusions may be drawn from the cumulative evidence emerging from these studies.

The first conclusion concerns the value of connecting research concerned with the correlates, antecedents and consequences of individual differences in religion around

measures accessing the affective dimension of religion. If, as Francis (2009) argued, the affective dimension does get closer to the heart of the part played by religion in people's lives (closer than measures of religious affiliation, belief and practice), it is reasonable to hypothesise stable associations to be tracked across diverse populations. So far this has proved to be the case in respect of associations with happiness.

The second conclusion concerns the value of careful replication concerned with addressing the same research question and employing the same family of instruments accessing the affective dimension of religion across diverse populations. While the recent series of studies concerned with the connection between religion and happiness has established the association largely through employing the Oxford Happiness Inventory, the present study has shown that the same finding emerges using a different conceptualisation and operationalisation of happiness.

The next step in building on this research tradition may consider taking research in two directions. First, more studies would be welcome employing the Powell Index of Global Happiness alongside measures of religious affect among other samples of young people to check whether the same finding occurs beyond the sample of young Australian churchgoers. Second, published studies have so far been restricted to samples in which the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity (Francis, Lewis, Philipchalk, Brown, & Lester, 1995) or the Katz-Francis Scale of Attitude toward Judaism (Francis & Katz, 2007) have been included. More studies would be welcome extending this research within other religious traditions, employing the Sahin-Francis Scale of Attitude toward Islam (Sahin & Francis, 2002) or the Santosh-Francis Scale of Attitude toward Hinduism (Francis, Santosh, Robbins, & Vij, 2008).

This body of scientific research across religious traditions also carries specific implications for Christian education. Since the present data were generated by young people (between the ages of 8 and 14 years) who were attending church services or church-related

activities (like Sunday School), it is clear that all of these young people were in some form of active contact with the Christian Church. Among these young people, differences in levels of personal wellbeing (as accessed through the measure of global happiness) were related to individual differences in religious affect (as accessed through the attitudinal measure). It remains important for churches, therefore, to be aware of and to pay attention to the religious affect of their young participants and not simply monitor the frequency of their attendance. Sensitivity to the factors that either promote or inhibit positive attitudes to their church and to their Christian faith may hold an important educational key not only to the religious development of these young participants, but also to their personal wellbeing.

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Table 1

*Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity: Scale properties*

| Scale item | $r$ | % |
|---|---|---|
| I know that Jesus helps me | .72 | 91 |
| I think going to church is a waste of time* | .47 | 7 |
| God helps me to lead a better life | .74 | 90 |
| God means a lot to me | .78 | 91 |
| Prayer helps me a lot | .73 | 81 |
| I know that Jesus is very close to me | .78 | 87 |
| I think the Bible is helpful to my life | .72 | 78 |
| | | |
| Alpha coefficient | .90 | |

Note    % = sum of agree and agree strongly responses

   $r$ = correlation between individual item and sum of other six items

   *this negative item was reverse scored to calculate $r$

   N = 6,194

Table 2

*Powell Index of Global Happiness: Scale properties*

|  | *r* | % |
|---|---|---|
| I am happy with school | .37 | 85 |
| I am happy with where I live | .40 | 94 |
| I am happy with my family | .44 | 95 |
| I am happy with myself | .43 | 91 |
| Alpha coefficient | .62 | |

Note   % = sum of agree and agree strongly responses

r = correlation between individual item and sum of other six items

N = 6,194

Table 3

*Correlation matrix*

| | attitude toward Christianity | happiness | age |
|---|---|---|---|
| sex | .09*** | .06*** | .01 |
| age | -.18*** | -.14*** | |
| happiness | .38*** | | |

Note: *** $p < .001$

N = 6,194

Table 4

*Multiple- regression*

| predictor variables | $R^2$ | Increase | | | Beta | $t$ | $p<$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | $R^2$ | $F$ | $p<$ | | | |
| sex | .003 | .003 | 20.1 | .001 | .03 | 2.2 | .05 |
| age | .023 | .019 | 121.6 | .001 | -.07 | -6.2 | .001 |
| attitude toward Christianity | .148 | .125 | 896.8 | .001 | .36 | 30.0 | .001 |

N = 6,194